

A CLASS ACT

NICK BOCKWINKEL 1934-2015

Following the death of Nick Bockwinkel, David Bixenspan looks back on the former AWA World champion's career, and talks to his peers to confirm him as an all-time in-ring great, and one of the most upstanding human beings to ever grace the sport.

Pro wrestling had few better representatives than multiple Hall of Fame inductee Nick Bockwinkel, who passed away on November 14 after a long battle with Alzheimer's Disease. A brilliant wrestler, an elite talker, and a good friend to many, it was tough for those closest to him to see him go that way. Not that it ever isn't, but Bockwinkel was a man known for being one of pro wrestling's best and brightest; sharp as a tack, with a knack for promos that used lots of five-dollar words, all with greatest air of authority.

"The last [time] I saw him [was] at the Cauliflower Alley Club [reunion]. I received an award, and he wasn't doing very well; his memory was going, and he had some other problems," recalled long-time friend and fellow AWA legend Larry "The Axe" Hennig to **FSM**. "I'm glad I got there to see him. He didn't recognise anybody really well; he had that memory loss. I sat at his table, and we had lunch together. He was in a wheelchair, and that was sad, to see somebody that was always up-and-at-'em taken down with that, along with the dementia."

Indeed, that's not how we should remember the brilliant Nick Bockwinkel, who was truly one of the great men of professional wrestling.

BORN TO THE BUSINESS

Born on December 6, 1934 in St. Louis, Missouri, Nick was the son of Warren Bockwinkel, a wrestler who was active from The Great Depression through the early television era. There were not many second-generation wrestlers back in the 1950s, when Nick started, to the point that it made him unique. To wit, it's central to the one promo that exists from his early days in Los Angeles.

"I enjoy getting a chance to talk about [my father]. I'm very proud of him," Nick told interviewer Jules Strongbow. "For many of the wrestlers that have wrestled him that I've run into in later years, they've all respected and admired me for... (pauses) I guess maybe they think it carried over into me. I hope I can match up to everything [he was]."

Nick focused primarily on the Western territories, rarely venturing east of Ohio. He went everywhere from California to Texas to Calgary to his personal favourite destination, Hawaii, where he was known as "The Man of 1,000 Holds". The 50th state was home to a booming territory in the '60s, attracting both great full-time talent and those making guest appearances on stopovers to and from trips to

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Former AWA World champion Nick Bockwinkel sadly passed away on November 14



Nick was a second-generation wrestler, following his father Warren Bockwinkel

Australia and Japan. Bockwinkel came about as close to homesteading the territory as he could without moving there permanently, with annual trips throughout the decade and stops between his own foreign tours. In Japan, he was a big enough star that he went to a draw with Giant Baba on his first tour in 1964, and he had perhaps even more success in Australia. Down under, Bockwinkel beat international stars like Waldo Von Erich, drew with Killer Kowalski when the latter was the promotion's biggest star, and teamed with the top babyfaces including Bruno Sammartino and Dominic DeNucci.

After a fruitful run in Georgia where he first turned heel, he settled into the territory with which he's most closely associated, the AWA. From 1971 through 1987, he floated back and forth between being either the top contender to the World title, the champion, or one half of the Tag Team champions. When Verne Gagne was AWA World champion, the title was rarely defended, and the Tag Team titles were the ongoing house show attraction, which made Bockwinkel the incumbent top heel. After dethroning Gagne on November 8, 1975 – in the first of four reigns that totalled eight years on top – Bockwinkel slowly gave the title a makeover; not only was he a more active champion, but he started to take dates in other territories to defend the title. For a number of reasons, booking him became more palatable than booking the NWA champion: he was easier to get dates on at a time when promoters were dissatisfied with the NWA for a variety of reasons, and some even thought they could convince Gagne to give their top star a token run as champion. When Bockwinkel became the World champion in places like Tennessee and Western Canada on top of his commitments in the AWA and Japan, as well as making shots in major NWA territories, he put the AWA title on the map as more than a regional belt.

When Hulk Hogan became a sensation as a babyface in the AWA, Bockwinkel was his heel foil. Politics over conflicting Japanese obligations kept Hogan from taking the title, resulting in a series of screwjobs, but at least when Hogan left for the WWF, the booking hadn't discouraged fans at all. Bockwinkel helped keep the AWA afloat, and it drew much better in the early years of the wrestling war than WWE would subsequently give them credit for, though eventually it was raided for talent, and gutted beyond recognition. By 1987, the promotion's house show schedule was dwindling, and the WWF offered Nick a job as a road agent, which he took after his final tour with All Japan. The run, which also included some announcing try-outs, didn't prove to be as fruitful as anticipated, and he mostly retired from the business at that point. Bockwinkel returned for a short run as WCW Commissioner in 1994, and showed up at numerous legends events, but after he left the WWF, he was mostly content to work in various financial services businesses before quietly retiring in Las Vegas with his second wife, Darlene.

BECOMING BOCKWINKEL

The Nick Bockwinkel that fans are familiar with came into being in his late-1960s run in the original version of the Georgia territory. Before that, he was a veteran babyface whose persona was that of a

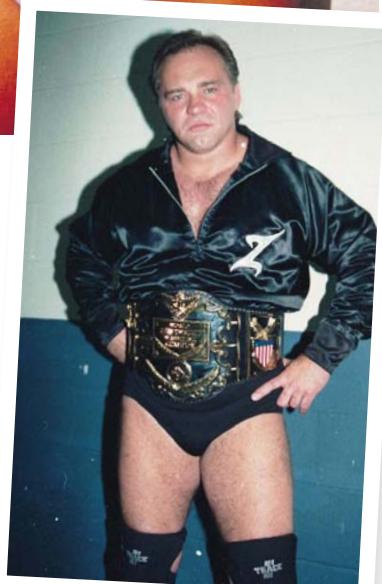
It was Nick Bockwinkel who set up Hulk Hogan for his monster run in the WWF



really amiable, handsome jock, wearing a haircut that evoked American football legend Johnny Unitas.

It was under that guise that he made a name for himself towards tail end of the network television era in Los Angeles. He looked to be well on his way to being a career babyface when he met his match in NWA World heavyweight champion Dory Funk Jr. in Atlanta, after which he slowly started to act more stuck-up, more full of himself, like he was better than the Georgia fans. Then he cut one promo that set the tone for the rest of his career.

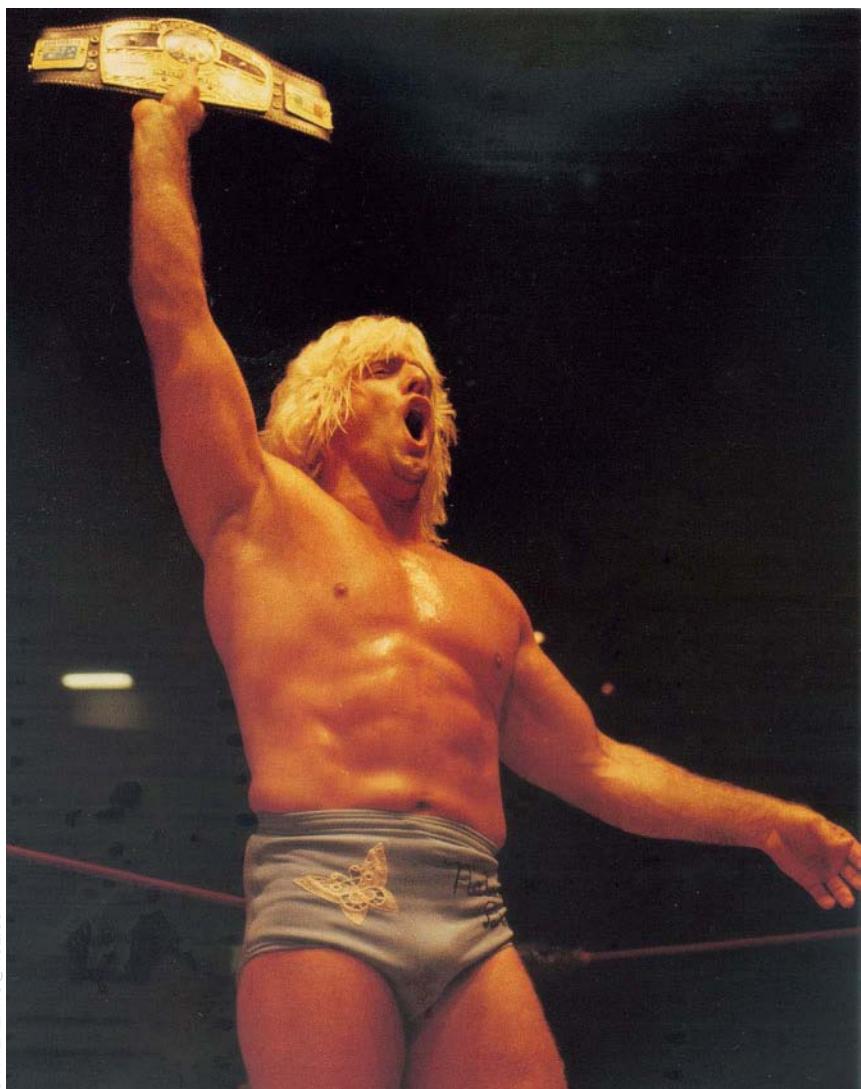
"I said, 'Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, page 1,348, the far right column, the 36th word down is 'Funk'. F-U-N-K,' he recounted to Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson for their book *The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels*. "Definition: to retreat in terror, to be afraid, to be not confident.' I slammed the other half of the book closed. I said,



Larry Zbyszko insists that Bockwinkel's presence provided a great environment in which to learn

"Nick was one of the first guys coming along who used big words, and talked elegant, and sounded like a super smart college professor and not a professional wrestler"

Though still an all-time great, Ric Flair did not have diverse matches in the manner of Nick Bockwinkel



'Thank you', and I walked off. The TV station said they got more response, the office got more response, just out of that little tidbit."

The idea that Bockwinkel would routinely study the dictionary was a shoot: he used it to find big words for his promos, creating a running list from which he could skim off the top of his head.

Larry Zbyszko was one of Bockwinkel's last major rivals in the AWA, and broke down to **FSM** what exactly he learnt about promos from him.

"Interviews were a big part of [pro wrestling], and still are. Even on the microphone, he could talk and get the same [reaction as his in-ring wrestling]. I stole things from the old-timers, anything that got over, and I realised that the ones that got over were the ones that could make people believe it - pretend that they were really good guys or bad guys or whatever. No matter what they thought of wrestling, when Larry Zbyszko went out in those days, people believed I was an asshole. They just believed [that] in real life, I was an asshole. Then I had 'em hooked. It was easy. That's what stuck [from what] I learnt from guys like Nick."

"Nick and Bobby Heenan were like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis when they first came up; they just suited each other and made each other better"

Zbyszko continued by dissecting Nick's promo style specifically.

"When you put him next to the professional wrestler of those days - you know, Mad Dog [Vachon], The Crusher - Nick talked different. And he was smart enough to know big words, which pro wrestlers in those days didn't know because they were all kind of gruff and tough characters. So Nick was one of the first guys coming along who used big words, and talked elegant, and sounded like a super smart college professor and not a professional wrestler. The other guys were like [rambles loudly in a stereotypical pro wrestler voice]. Nick was this elegant kind of guy that could use big words, and the wrestling fans wouldn't even understand what he was saying. So they just didn't like him, because he did it like an asshole. He knew the business, he knew the art, and he was good at it."

As it happened, Zbyszko liked to needle Bockwinkel for not quite being what he made himself out to be.

"He was a funny guy. He thought he was much smarter and more elegant than he really was; he was kind of like The Absent-Minded Professor. I'll give you an example, one story that cracks me up. He invited me and ['Mr Electricity'] Steve Regal to go on his boat with him and Darlene. So we pull up to this lake in Minnesota, and Nick's wife goes to sit in her seat on the boat. They're lowering the boat into the water and Steve Regal drives away with the trailer."

It was a beautiful day with many boats on the water, so parking was at a premium, and Regal had to drive close to a mile away to find a spot for the truck and trailer they'd used to transport to boat to the shore. While they waited for Regal to return, something went awry.

"Darlene starts saying, 'Oh Nicholas, the boat is filling up with water!' And Nick goes 'What?!" So now the boat is starting to sink. I have no idea about boats; I'm watching this on the shore, and his wife Darlene's a very pretty woman, all [dressed] up, and not moving because she didn't like getting wet. So the whole thing is a cartoon."

In the era before mobile phones, they then had no way of telling Regal to bring the truck back until they saw him walking over, at which point they were screaming "Get the truck!" Apparently, Bockwinkel had forgotten to put plugs back in their release valves for excess water.

"Nick took the plugs out to drain, but never put them back in, so he put the boat back in the water with two big holes in [it], didn't even know it, and sunk the damn thing!"

"I'm sure everybody else told you this, too, but [when you asked] Nick what time it was, he'd tell you how to make a watch. Good guy, good guy."

A WRESTLING CHAMELEON

In the ring, Bockwinkel's biggest strengths were his smoothness and his versatility. The former hid his age as he became an AWA legend, but the latter is

©WorrellJack Over the last two weeks, the wrestling community lost two of their favourite sons. Rest in peace Don Fargo and Nick Bockwinkel

what helped him stand out as one of the greatest workers of all-time. As great a worker as someone like Jerry Lawler was, for example, the idea of him wrestling Bockwinkel doesn't necessarily sound like an amazing match; Lawler was primarily a brawler and Bockwinkel was a '70s style "wrestling heel", and while both have had fine bouts with wrestlers of the other's archetype, their best matches are with more similar opponents, such as Bill Dundee for Lawler and Billy Robinson for Bockwinkel. Nick was so talented, however, that he was able to craft unique matches that were enough to make him Lawler's definitive World champion foil.

"Nick was an all-around great talent," Zbyszko explained. "He was a professional wrestler, and he knew how to do it, along with a lot of guys in those days. That art's become kind of lost, unfortunately, and hopefully we can put some of it back in – getting in the ring and having a good match with anybody. I could do that, and some other guys could do that. [Ric] Flair was what some guys would call a routine guy, where basically every match was the same, but then there were guys like Nick who could have a different match with different guys. He was just that good. He came from a time when the wrestlers were wrestlers; they weren't diving through tables or clotheslining you, and that's all they knew. These guys knew how to wrestle, and get the crowds going."

THE HEENAN FAMILY

You can't talk about Nick Bockwinkel without bringing up Bobby Heenan, as together, they were possibly the greatest wrestler/manager pairing in the history of the business. In pro wrestling, managers are associated with the idea of helping an in-ring performer get over by adding something that he's missing. Nick wasn't missing anything; he was a great, well-rounded worker in excellent shape, with a gift for gab. Indeed, when Heenan first joined up with him in 1974, it was when he was teaming with Ray Stevens, who was no slouch on the stick himself, and yet Heenan still added a great deal to the act. He and Bockwinkel were two sides of the same coin; cocky California playboys who claimed to commute to the AWA territory, unlike the blue-collar babyfaces. Their banter was classic, with the closest modern comparison being CM Punk and Paul Heyman, in the sense that neither truly needed the other, but they made each other that much better.

They got on just as well outside of wrestling as they did in it, becoming good friends and socialising regularly away from the ring.

"They were both generous with each other. If Bobby had something to say, Nick would know to let him talk, and they played off of each other, or played off of the interviewer, whether it was Gene Okerlund, or Marty O'Neill, or whoever it might be," fellow AWA legend Baron Von Raschke told **FSM**. "It was like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis when they first came up; they just suited each other and made each other better."

The AWA was known for great promos, arguably even more so than most territories, and being around the best talkers in the business certainly rubbed off on all of the other wrestlers, as Von Raschke explained.



Bockwinkel and Bobby Heenan (with Dominic DeNucci) were a classic duo that fed off the other



Bockwinkel and Ray Stevens had three AWA Tag Team title reigns totalling 1,202 days

"Guys that you've probably never even heard of, [like] Bull Bullinski, became a great interview. 'Scrap Iron' George Gadaski – he and Kenny Jay had Loser Leaves Town matches, and they had some great interviews, [even though] they were guys who just worked on weekends. [It was] by being around those kinds of people. It was just a great environment."

As for Ray Stevens, Bockwinkel's most iconic tag team partner, the key to success was that they were as different in a wrestling context as Nick and Bobby were similar.

"That was a classic couple," Zbyszko remarked. "They were like The Odd Couple. Nick was like Felix Unger: everything's neat, he's always looking good, he's got the sports coat on, and he's elegant. Ray was like Oscar Madison; he had his beer gut, having a good old time, messed up, he don't give a shit. You

know, Nick drinking milk and Ray smoking cigarettes, he don't care. But together, they were funny as hell."

AGE IS BUT A NUMBER

Until his illness took hold, Bockwinkel was known for being one of the business' most ageless individuals.

"You know, [relative to] my age group, Nick was a generation ahead of me," Zbyszko explained. "When I came to the AWA, he was a guy that had been around a long time, and basically was getting ready to go. But he was in such good shape, took care of himself, and in the ring he was very smooth, and a smart guy. We had a lot of classic matches."

He might have looked a little old for his age when he was younger, but Bockwinkel then seemingly stopped aging facially, like Arn Anderson or Yoshiaki Fujiwara. He didn't start in the AWA, the territory with which he's synonymous, until he was 35, didn't win its World title until he was 40, and lost the belt for the last time when he was 51, just before his retirement.

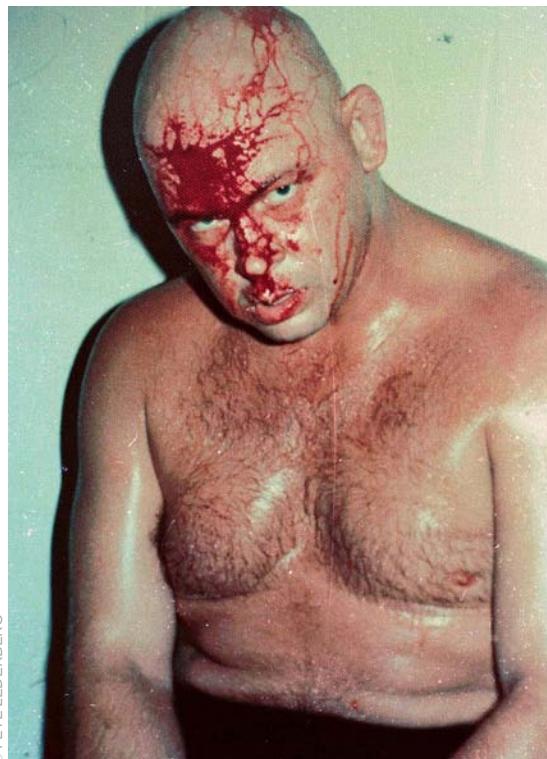
Nick did return to the ring a few times in the early-'90s for legends matches in Japan (versus Masa Saito for New Japan, and Billy Robinson for UWFI) and the United States (versus Dory Funk Jr. for WCW), looking and working exactly the same as he always did. The Funk bout, which was the main attraction of the legends portion of the first *Slamboree* in 1993, was the last of Bockwinkel's career. A symbolic battle of the AWA and NWA, the two legendary champions went to a time-limit draw after 15 minutes of great '70s-style pro wrestling, with Funk as the heel even though Atlanta was an NWA town. "The ATL" may not have been where Bockwinkel started his career, but it was where he became a heel, and developed the persona that helped put him on the map as an all-time great.

In his retirement match, that all came full circle, going out as a babyface in the Omni and getting a standing ovation after the final bell.

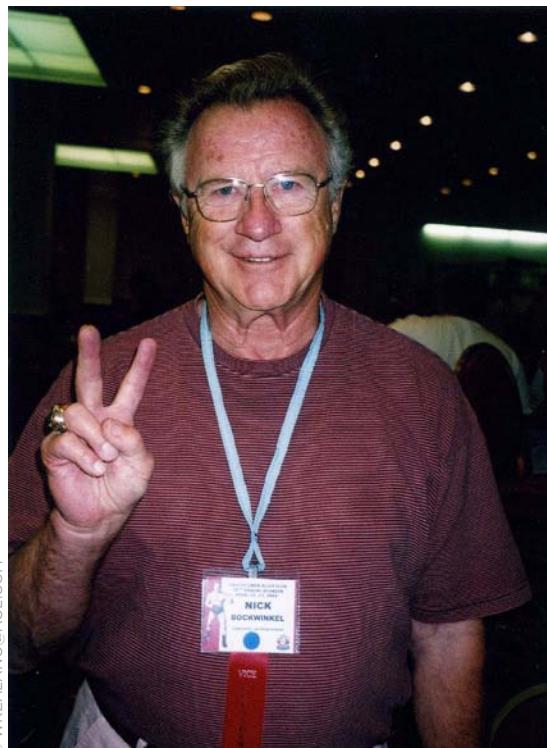
A CUT ABOVE

If there is one word that you'll always hear used to describe Nick Bockwinkel, it is "class". Whether it was about the image he projected as champion or the real person behind the wrestling persona, he was at a level above most in the business. In his later years, he was a vital part of the Cauliflower Alley Club, eventually serving as its president. While best-known for its annual reunion event in Las Vegas, the CAC is also a benevolent organisation that helps out older wrestlers, something that was very much in the spirit of the way Nick felt about his brothers in the locker-room.

"He had a New Year's Eve party, and all of the wrestlers who were married or couples in the Minneapolis area at the time, he and Darlene had us [all] over at their house," explained Von Raschke. "We were all dressed in costumes for some reason; I went as Daddy Warbucks, my wife was Little Orphan Annie, and we won the contest. I put on the rubber thing over my head so I looked bald... (pauses) I am bald, get it?! And my wife had curly hair. Anyway, it just so happened that the temperature when we got there was maybe zero [degrees fahrenheit] or so - you know, not bad for Minnesota - so by the time we came out, it was like 20 or 30 below. My car wouldn't



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Baron Von Raschke remembers Bockwinkel as the kind of man "who would give you the shirt off his back"

start, the battery's dead, it's freezing, and [we're] not properly dressed for the evening, so Nick gave me his car, which was in the garage, and we drove home in his car and took it back the next day to get my car."

For Von Raschke, it summed up what made Bockwinkel a special person.

"That was something nice of him to do. He was that kind of guy; he'd give you the shirt off his back, or the Cadillac out of his garage if he had to. To me, he was a good guy, and a good professional wrestler. I'm glad I got to meet him, to know him, and all that."

"He was a class act, yeah. He wasn't acting; he was a pretty classy guy."